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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001172

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DEPT FOR DRL AND EUR/CARC

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SUBJECT: MURDER CASE POINTS UP CONTINUING HOMOPHOBIA IN
ARMENIA

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Classified By: Acting DCM Robin Philips for Reason 1.4b.

11. (C) SUMMARY: The August 9 murder of an openly gay businessman has sparked fears in the Armenian gay community of a new round of police harassment. While some believe the societal attitudes have improved since the 2003 decriminalization of homosexual activity, credible reports persist that police harass and maintain extensive dossiers on gay men. A recently established gay rights/health advocacy NGO claims that societal discrimination, assaults, and police harassment are a constant threat. END SUMMARY.

MURDER INVESTIGATION OR WITCH HUNT?

12. (C) On August 9, Armen Grigoryan, the openly-gay manager of a jewelry store chain, was found dead in his apartment with his hands and feet tied to his bed and with multiple skull fractures. The police investigation to this point seems to have focused mainly on possible partners. Grigor Simonyan (please protect), a contact in the gay community, told us he had heard reports that police had started to round up gay men from a city park popular with the gay community. Simonyan reported that the men had been subjected to hostile questioning while in custody. Tim Straight (please protect), a Norwegian diplomat with wide contacts in the local gay community, confirmed these reports, but was less critical of the authorities, because, he pointed out, the murderer may in fact be from that community. Straight further noted his concern that this murder could serve as another opportunity for the police to beef up what has been termed their "gay archive" and further harass homosexuals.

NEW GAY RIGHTS NGO

13. (C) Simonyan (currently studying in Scotland) and Karen Badalyan (please protect) recently registered an advocacy NGO aimed at promoting gay rights, while also combating the spread of HIV/AIDS and STDs. Funded by the Dutch government, the NGO, "We for Civil Equality," will run a hotline to provide medical, psychological, social and legal consulting. However, the founders were advised not to mention the words "sexual minorities" or "homosexual" in the NGO's registration package to avoid difficulties with the authorities.

14. (C) Yerevan's small gay community, numbering some 500, affords practically the only social niche for openly gay men in Armenia. Same-sex orientation is virtually invisible in the countryside and among women. While the legal situation for gay men has improved over the last three years, it remains far from ideal. Noting continued gay bashing, discrimination and social intolerance, Badalyan described conditions in Armenia as "simply horrible" for the gay community. He listed specific instances of individuals who have been fired from their jobs, or have been "outed" by the police to their unaware families. Moreover, both Straight and Badalyan believe that they are under constant e-mail and telephone surveillance by the authorities who, according to Badalyan, still view homosexuality as aberrant. Gay men are also customarily exempted from military service on grounds of homosexuality. GOAM sources claim this is because authorities' are unable to protect gay men from violence and abuse at the hands of homophobic fellow soldiers.

16. (C) Despite 2003 legislation criminalizing discrimination based on sexual orientation and decriminalizing homosexual conduct, societal attitudes continue to be quite negative. Armenian men may commonly express their prejudices by refusing to eat or shake hands with openly gay persons. Popular gay gathering places may be targeted by those who would do homosexuals harm.

COMMENT

17. (C) While making small steps toward greater social tolerance, Armenian social attitudes--among both

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authorities and society at large alike--have a long way to go to approach the levels of acceptance and integration which have become the norm in the United States or Western Europe. Resources for help and outreach are quite scarce for gay and especially lesbian Armenians. The recent legislative changes and the newly emerging civil society advocacy are encouraging first steps for what will doubtless be a lengthy road toward broader social acceptance. END COMMENT.
EVANS